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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BAGHDAD 001022

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SUBJECT: MCNS APPROVES PLAN TO ADDRESS MILITIA PROBLEM

REF: BAGHDAD 981

Classified By: AMBASSADOR ZALMAY KHALILZAD FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

11. (C//REL GBR AUS) SUMMARY: On March 26, 2006, the Iraqi Ministerial Committee for National Security (MCNS) met to review a plan to address the growing problem of militia violence. The committee agreed to approve a five point action plan which calls for (1) discussing the issue with the national leaders of groups that have armed militias and then with commanders of the militias in the Baghdad area; (2) contacting neighboring states to ask them to stop supporting armed groups; (3) launching a media campaign to advise the public that actions against armed groups are being taken throughout Baghdad and its suburbs and are not aimed at any one particular group; (4) continuing Operation Scales of Justice; and (5) launching a joint operation including MNF-I, Iraqi Security Forces, and members of armed groups to enforce weapons control laws, remove checkpoints and patrols manned by armed groups, and remove signs and other indications of support for armed groups. MNF-I Commanding General Casey will work with the Iraqis to propose specific actions to implement each step of this plan and bring them back to the Prime Minister within the next few days. Prime Minister Ja'afari underlined that he opposes taking military actions against the Jaysh al-Mahdi. END SUMMARY.

12. (C//REL GBR AUS) Prime Minister Ibrahim Ja'afari convened a meeting of the MCNS at his residence the evening of March 26 to follow up on discussions held March 22 (reftel) regarding militia violence. Present were MNF-I Commanding General Casey, Minister of Defense Saadoun Dulime, Minister of Interior Bayan Jabr, and National Security Advisor Dr. Mowaffak al-Rubaie. Absent were Ambassador (Embassy was represented by Acting PolMilCouns), the British Ambassador (represented by the Charge), and Minister of State for National Security Affairs Karim al-Anzi. Also present were MNSTC-I Commanding General Dempsey, MNF-I Deputy Commanding General Fry, the Prime Minister's Chief of Staff al-Tamimi and Military Advisor al-Kanini.

FIVE POINT PLAN

13. (C//REL GBR AUS) Rubaie reminded the committee that following the last meeting, the Prime Minister had tasked him to work with the Ministers of Interior and Defense, along with GEN Casey, to propose a plan to deal with militia violence. The goal of the plan is to reduce the influence and capabilities of armed groups in Baghdad through political involvement and focused military and security operations. The proposed plan consists of the following five points:

-- begin discussions on the issue on two tracks with national political groups that have armed groups - first with their national leadership and second with field level commanders;

-- demarche neighboring states to demand they cease meddling in Iraq's internal affairs by supporting armed groups in Iraq;

-- launch a media campaign to inform the public that actions taken to control armed groups are (a) taking place throughout Baghdad and its suburbs; (b) designed to remove all vestiges of an illegal armed presence and are not directed at any particular ethnic, political, sectarian, or religious group; and (c) has a goal of increasing the presence of Iraqi security forces through the city in order to increase the confidence of the people that security is being provided and there is no longer a need for armed groups;

-- continue to execute Operation Scales of Justice (which includes increased patrols in Baghdad and specific, targeted operations in the Baghdad region); and

-- conduct joint operations among Coalition forces, Ministry of Interior forces, Ministry of Defense forces, and armed groups focused on (a) ending the presence of illegally armed people, (b) removing printed announcements, signs, pictures, and slogans that promote armed groups and their leaders, (c) dismantling checkpoints manned by illegally armed groups, and (d) ending patrols by illegally armed groups.

14. (C//REL GBR AUS) According to Rubaie's presentation, the benefits of this plan are that it focuses on the stability and security of Baghdad, prepares the ground for a plan to

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deal with armed groups throughout Iraq if it is successful in Baghdad, gives the leaders of armed groups the opportunity to take a non-confrontational face-saving exit, increases the confidence of the people in the government and the security forces, and positions the government to deal from a position of strength with armed groups in other parts of Iraq. The risks are that armed clashes will result, that some political groups might misunderstand and think the purpose of the plan is to weaken them, and that if a plan is announced and then not implemented it will make the government look very weak. (This last point was included at the insistence of MinDef Dulime.)

15. (C//REL GBR AUS) The timetable for implementation of the plan, as proposed by Rubaie, calls for the MCNS and Prime Minister to approve it by the end of March or early April and for discussions and political involvement with political leaders controlling the groups and the media campaign to begin in early April. Operation Scales of Justice has already begun and will continue through government formation; enforcement (presumably of weapons control measures) will begin in mid-April. (COMMENT: The plan specifically avoids mention of Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) and is couched in general terms in order to provide Ja'afari with cover when he is ultimately confronted by JAM's leader Moqtada al-Sadr. END COMMENT.)

CONFLICT AVOIDANCE

16. (C//REL GBR AUS) Following Rubaie's presentation Ja'afari launched into a long discussion of the plan. He continued to emphasize that his clear preference is to follow the path of political engagement and did not even mention the aspects of the plan that contemplate taking steps to physically confront or limit the actions of militias. He opined that the security and political environment calls for extraordinary patience, that it would be dangerous to take actions that would create more problems by inciting more violence, and that to attack the militias now would be wrong.

He agreed that the militias should be engaged politically and that a media campaign should be launched. He explained his view that there are four types of militias in Iraq. The first existed before the fall of Saddam - Peshmerga; the second rose at the fall of Saddam - Badr Corps; the third rose after the fall of Saddam - Jaysh al-Mahdi; and the fourth type includes former Ba'athists and Takfiris. Of those, the first three must be brought into the system while the fight remains focused on the Ba'athist insurgency, which, in his opinion, continues to pose the greatest risk to Iraq.

17. (C//REL GBR AUS) GEN Casey replied that he sees things differently with regard to the greatest threat to Iraq. The insurgency is fighting the Coalition and Iraqi forces, not killing civilians. The terrorists and certain elements of some militias are killing civilians and are trying, with increasing success, to push Iraq into a sectarian conflict that could tear apart the country. LTG Dempsey pointed out that the confidence of the Iraqi people is at stake and will continue to wither until legitimate Iraqi security forces can show they are in control. He also urged Ja'afari to see that militias are all different and that some contain out-of-control elements that are involved in differing levels of activity, ranging from establishing neighborhood-watch groups, to criminal kidnapping for money, to extremists who run unsanctioned Sharia courts and carry out executions and torture. While it might be possible and desirable to bring in those who are less extreme, such as the neighborhood watch groups, those who are engaged in criminal activities must answer to the law. Acting PolMilCouns advised Ja'afari that the Embassy fully supports political engagement with those elements of the militias who can be brought into the political process, but the status quo as far as murders, executions, and other criminal activities engaged in by militia elements cannot be tolerated. These criminal elements must be addressed by the Iraqi government.

18. (C//REL GBR AUS) Ja'afari ultimately concluded that he supports the plan but strongly prefers moving forward with its political engagement aspects. The militias must be offered a political solution. If they reject it, then action should be taken. With regard to JAM, Ja'afari urged that it be looked at from three angles. First, the situation cannot remain as it is. Second, a political, non-violent approach to solving this problem must be pursued. Third, legal aspects should be explored to see whether JAM can be brought

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within the purview of Coalition Provisional Authority Order 91 regarding militia reintegration, or whether other laws can be enacted to deal with its situation. Ja'afari directed the Ministers and Rubaie to work with GEN Casey to draw up a specific action plan to implement the overall strategy and to return for further discussion.

COMMENT

19. (C//REL GBR AUS) Ja'afari remains firmly opposed to considering taking any forceful or provocative action against JAM. The plan, as proposed, was purposefully designed to give him political top-cover by avoiding any direct mention of Moqtada al-Sadr, JAM, or specific regions of Baghdad. Instead, it generically addresses the need to confront criminal activity and armed groups throughout Baghdad. Nevertheless, while Ja'afari's desire to "overcome problems with ink and sweat rather than blood" is admirable and one we share, quick action is needed to stem the continuing flow of sectarian violence. MNF-I and Embassy will continue to press the Iraqis to move forward with all aspects of the proposed plan.
KHALILZAD